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ABSTRACT

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ATTRIBUTIONS OF THE SUCCESS-ORIENTED TEACHER FOR STUDENTS' SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

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Attributions of the Success-Oriented Teacher for Students' Successes and Failures

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ABSTRACT. Twenty-nine student teachers selected for high success orientation toward teaching, compared with thirty-four controls selected for high failure-avoidance orientation, took relatively more credit for their students' academic successes than they gave their students; they also accepted relatively more blame for students' failures. However, an analysis of the attribution subtests revealed that such differences reflected the fact that the success-oriented teachers attributed, more than the control group, both students' successes and failures to their own teaching efforts or lack of them, not to their teaching abilities. Results generally support an attributional interpretation of achievement motivation among teachers.

Attributions of the Success-Oriented Teacher for Students' Successes and Failures

Evan R. Keislar

There is evidence to suggest that teachers, like most other people, tend to accept greater responsibility for their successes than for their failures. Whether this reflects a self-serving bias, incomplete information or some other process is a subject of debate (Miller and Ross, 1975, Bradley, 1978). Nevertheless, Beckman (1970) showed that teachers believed they were the cause of a (fictitious) student's rapid learning; but when the student did poorly, they blamed the student, just the opposite of what an observer believed. Such a finding is typical of studies which deal more generally with differences in attribution by actors and observers (Eisen, 1979). In a subsequent study, Beckman (1973) verified these results only partially. Contrary to the earlier finding, there appeared to be increased willingness on the part of teachers to accept responsibility for the students' lack of progress. In explaining these conflicting findings, Beckman suggested that there may be differences among the two populations.

To explore further the role of individual differences in the making of such attributions, one purpose of the present study was to see whether teachers with high achievement motivation would show less of such a bias than those with a failure-avoidance orientation. A second purpose of the study was to determine, by analyzing these

attributions more fully and by testing certain predictions, whether the interpretation of achievement motivation offered by attribution theory (Weiner and Kukla, 1970, Weiner, 1972) may be fruitfully applied to the motivations of teachers.

Weiner (1972) has proposed that achievement motivation, as originally set forth by Atkinson's model, be viewed within the framework of attribution theory. He points out that the reactions of the achievement-motivated person to success and failure may best be understood by the person's causal beliefs. The achievement-motivated individual ascribes his successes to both ability and effort, yielding a stable base for personal pride and for acceptance of additional challenges. Failure, however, is not attributed to lack of ability but to low effort. Since effort is not a stable factor and can be modified at will, failure does not discourage high achievement motivated persons; instead, they are led to renewed vigor in attacking the task.

Hypotheses

This interpretation leads to the two major hypotheses of this study: (1) Teachers with high achievement motivation will attribute, more than those with low achievement motivation, their students' failures to themselves; (2) High achievement-motivated teachers will attribute, relatively more than the low achievement motivated, their students' successes to their own ability and effort, and their students' failures to their own lack of effort in teaching.

General Design of the Study

It was judged inappropriate to use a general measure of achievement motivation, such as that devised by Mehrabian (1969), for this study. It was deemed important to consider, as Maehr (1974) has intimated, achievement motivation in terms of the specific setting faced by teachers. A special test was thus developed, following Atkinson's model (1964), to measure success orientation of teachers in the classroom versus a failure-avoidance orientation.

Two other instruments were prepared to assess attributions by teachers for their students' successes and failures, respectively, in school. Subtests provided measures of attributions to ability, effort and personality. The test battery was taken anonymously by 130 student teachers completing their regular two-quarter practice teaching assignment.

Two groups of teachers, those falling approximately in the top and bottom twenty-seven percent on the success-orientation test were selected. The N's for the high and low groups were 29 and 34, respectively. The hypotheses were tested by comparing these two criterion groups on the responses given on the attribution tests.

Data Source

(1) Instrument to measure success orientation. The success-orientation test was limited strictly to the assessment of reactions of teachers as they face the classroom setting. Five items were prepared to tap the teachers' "hope for success"

relative to "fear of failure". A sixth item, with a greater emphasis on risk taking, was added since, in a factor analysis of thirty achievement-motivation items, this term, along with the other five, had high factor loading on the same major factor.

All of these items were constructed in a bi-polar format. By marking on a seven-point scale, the subjects showed their degree of preference for one of two alternatives, A or B, one reflecting a success orientation and the other a failure-avoidance. The six-item test of success orientation is presented in Figure 6.

The reliability, Cronbach's alpha, of this six-item test, on the basis of the results from 130 teachers, was found to be .72. Although admittedly not an appropriate validity criterion, an adaptation of the MARPS (Mehrabian 1969), a thirty-eight item test of achievement motivation, given nine months earlier, correlated significantly (r=.37) with the six-item success-orientation test.

(2) The attribution tests. In the instructions of the test for success attributions, subjects were asked to recall some recent typical occasions in which their students had "learned a lot." They were asked, "Why did they learn so much on these occasions?" Subjects then rated, on a scale from 0 to 5, the importance of each of twenty-one statements, arranged more or less in random order, to create seven subtests scores, each subtest consisting of three items. One of the subtests attributed success to the teacher's ability (e.g. "I have real

talent for teaching this subject."), one to teacher effort (e.g. "I spend a lot of time preparing for this lesson."), and one to teacher personality (e.g. "I really like the subject I was teaching that day."). In corresponding fashion three other subtests reflected attributions to the student. The final subtest which dealt with luck, chance happenings, will be ignored in this report. A corresponding set of twenty-one statements and seven subtests was prepared to obtain attributions for student failures, occasions when "students did not learn very much." The reliabilities of the twelve subtests, exluding the two dealing with luck, ranged from .63 to .86. The two attribution tests for student success and student failure are presented in Figures 7 and 8, respectively.

Results

A 2 x 2 x 3 repeated measures analysis of variance design, (two groups of teachers, attributions to teachers and to students, and three categories of attributions) was used to test hypotheses for success and for failure separately. Interactions were tested for the first hypothesis; t-tests were used within the cells for the second hypothesis. Means for each cell are presented in Tables 1 and 2. The same information is presented in Figures 1 through 5.

(1) General attributions to teacher and to student. If we look first at the problem at a gross level, the first hypothesis, and ask "Do success-oriented teachers, relative to the failure-avoidance oriented, attribute student failure more to themselves than to the students?" The answer is "yes." As shown in Table 2, the interaction among the total scores for group and teacher-student is significant ($F=4.91$, $p < .05$).

As might be expected success-oriented teachers take relatively more credit for their students' successes, shown in Table 1 ($F=5.04$, $p<.05$). These differences are shown in graphic form in Figures 2 and 3.

(2) Attributions to ability and effort. Turning to the second hypothesis of this study, we will need to look at the differences between the two groups of teachers in each of three pairs of cells. As shown in Table 1, and in Figure 4, the success-oriented group did not differ from the failure avoidance group with respect to success attributions to teacher ability as was predicted ($t=.14$) in Hypothesis Two. However, the difference in attributions to teacher effort was significant ($t=3.82$, $p<.01$). Similarly for student failure, as shown in Table 2 and in Figure 5, attributions to teacher effort were significantly greater for the success-oriented group ($t=3.06$, $p<.01$). Although not originally hypothesized, no personality attributions were found to be significantly different.

We may conclude that, in comparison with failure-avoidance teachers, those with a success orientation do accept relatively more blame, as well as credit, for their students' failures and success. But this doesn't tell the full story. Success-oriented teachers attribute student successes and failures to their own efforts as teachers, not particularly to their abilities or personalities.

Discussion

The findings must be considered in the light of a possible limitation: it is not clear how much the results are affected by the fact that on all the tests, many individuals were responding to a social desirability set, even though they knew that the tests would be anonymous. But one unexpected finding seems to suggest that such a response set, if present, was not too strong. The success-oriented teachers attributed student successes less to student ability than did the failure-avoidance teachers ($t=2.16$, $p<.05$), hardly a socially desirable position to express.

The results of the study have supported the attributional approach, as proposed by Weiner (1972), to achievement motivation in its application to teachers, particularly with respect to the factor of effort. The failure to support predictions regarding ability may be partly a function of the kind of items used or that teachers do not see "teaching ability" in the same way as a "general ability."

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TABLE 1

MEAN SCORES OF ATTRIBUTIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS BY TEACHERS WITH A SUCCESS AND A FAILURE AVOIDANCE ORIENTATION

		By Success-Oriented		By Failure Avoiding	
	Ability	10.0	(3.0)*	10.2	(2.9)
To	Effort	12.3	(1.9)	10.6	(2.3)
Teacher	Person.	9.9	(3.4)	9.9	(3.2)
	Total	32.2		30.7	
	Ability	7.9	(3.5)	9.3	(3.0)
To	Effort	11.2	(2.2)	11.1	(2.6)
Student	Person.	9.3	(2.6)	10.8	(2.9)
	Talent	28.4		31.2	

*The numbers in parenthesis refer to the corresponding standard deviation.

TABLE 2

MEAN SCORES OF ATTRIBUTIONS FOR STUDENT FAILURE BY TEACHERS WITH A SUCCESS AND A FAILURE AVOIDANCE ORIENTATION

		By Success Oriented		By Failure Avoiding	
To Teacher	Ability	4.9	(3.9)*	6.2	(3.4)
	Effort	9.6	(4.1)	7.6	(3.2)
	Person.	5.7	(3.7)	5.9	(3.5)
	Total	20.2		19.7	
To Student	Ability	5.4	(3.8)	7.2	(3.1)
	Effort	8.0	(3.8)	9.7	(3.4)
	Person.	8.2	(3.4)	9.8	(3.1)
	Total	21.6		26.7	

*The numbers in parenthesis refer to the corresponsing standard deviation.

FIGURE I

ATTRIBUTIONS OF ALL TEACHERS FOR STUDENTS' SUCCESS AND FAILURE

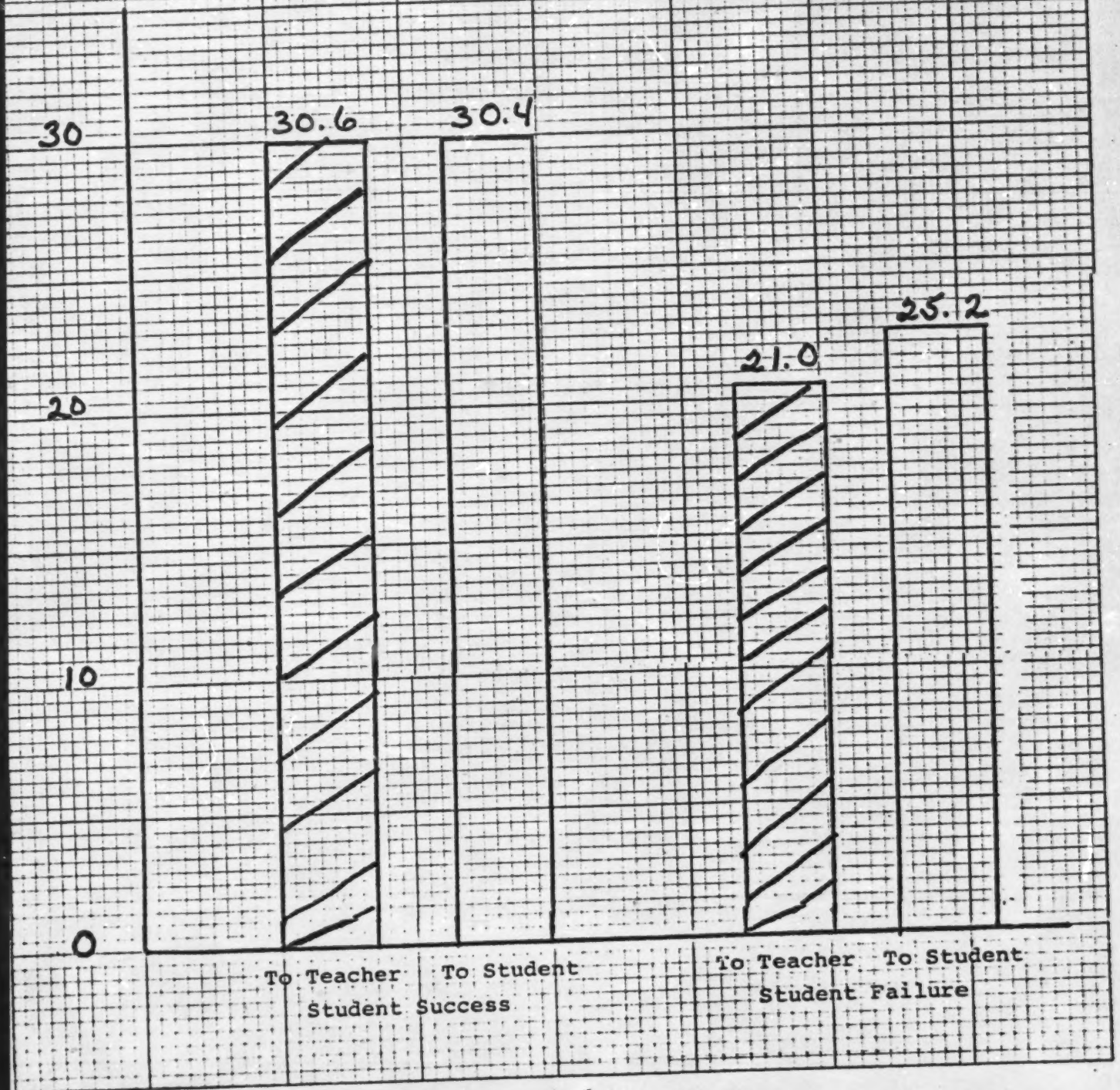


FIGURE 2

ATTRIBUTIONS OF TEACHERS WITH HIGH SUCCESS ORIENTATION FOR STUDENTS' SUCCESS AND FAILURE

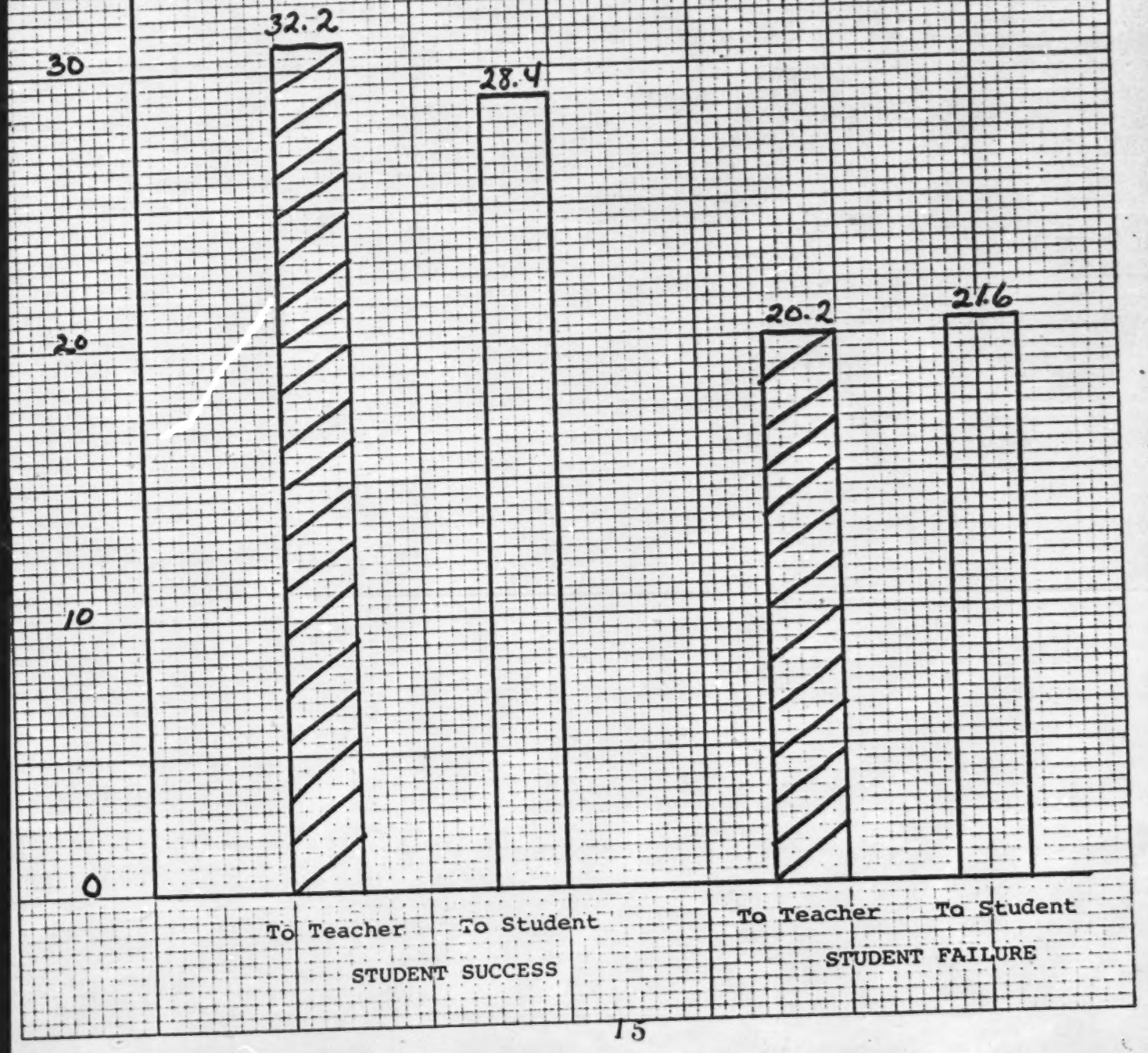


FIGURE 3

ATTRIBUTIONS OF TEACHERS WITH LOW SUCCESS ORIENTATION FOR STUDENTS' SUCCESS AND FAILURE

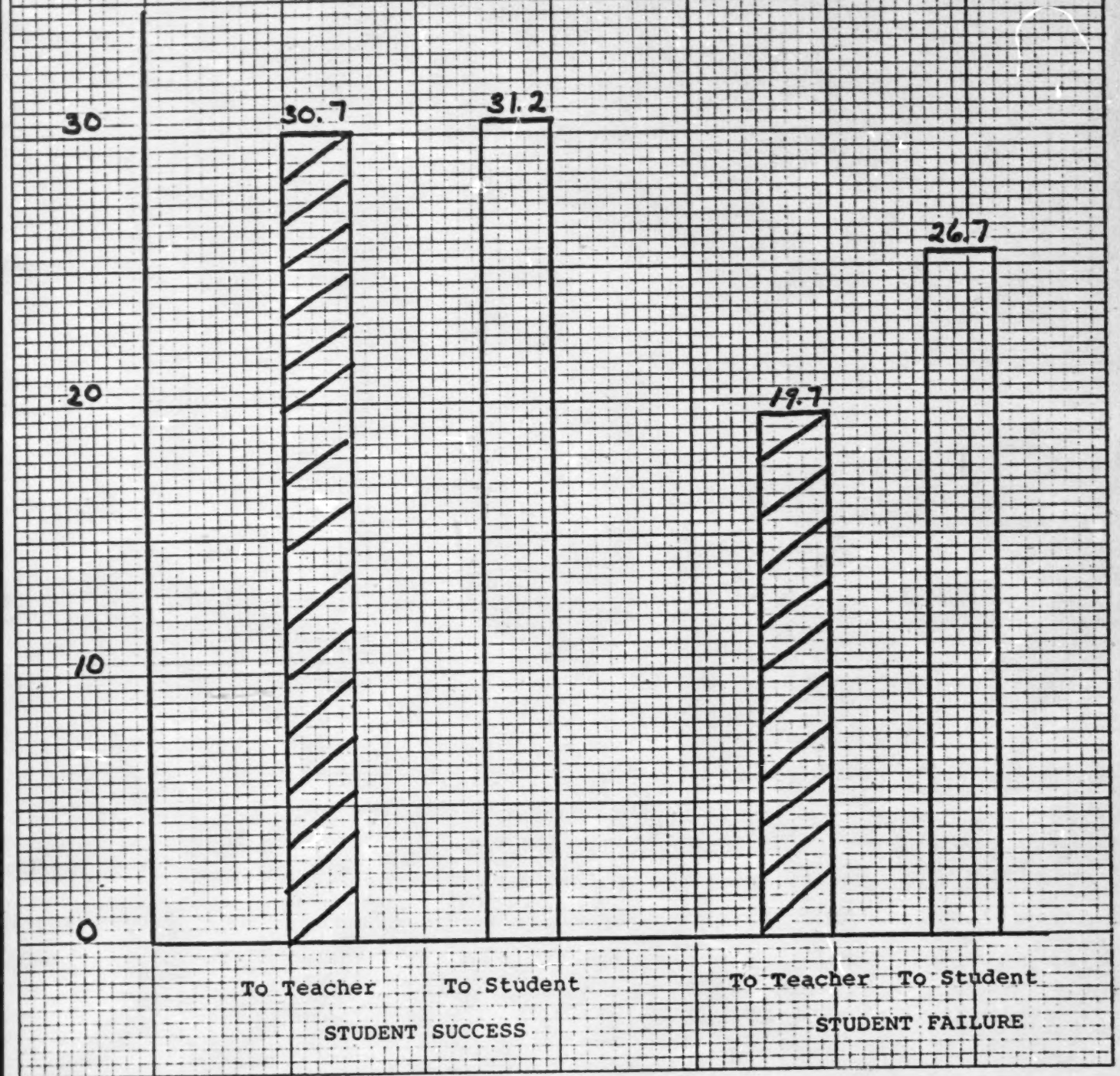


FIGURE 4

ATTRIBUTIONS TO ABILITY, EFFORT AND PERSONALITY OF TEACHERS WITH HIGH AND LOW SUCCESS ORIENTATION FOR STUDENTS' SUCCESS

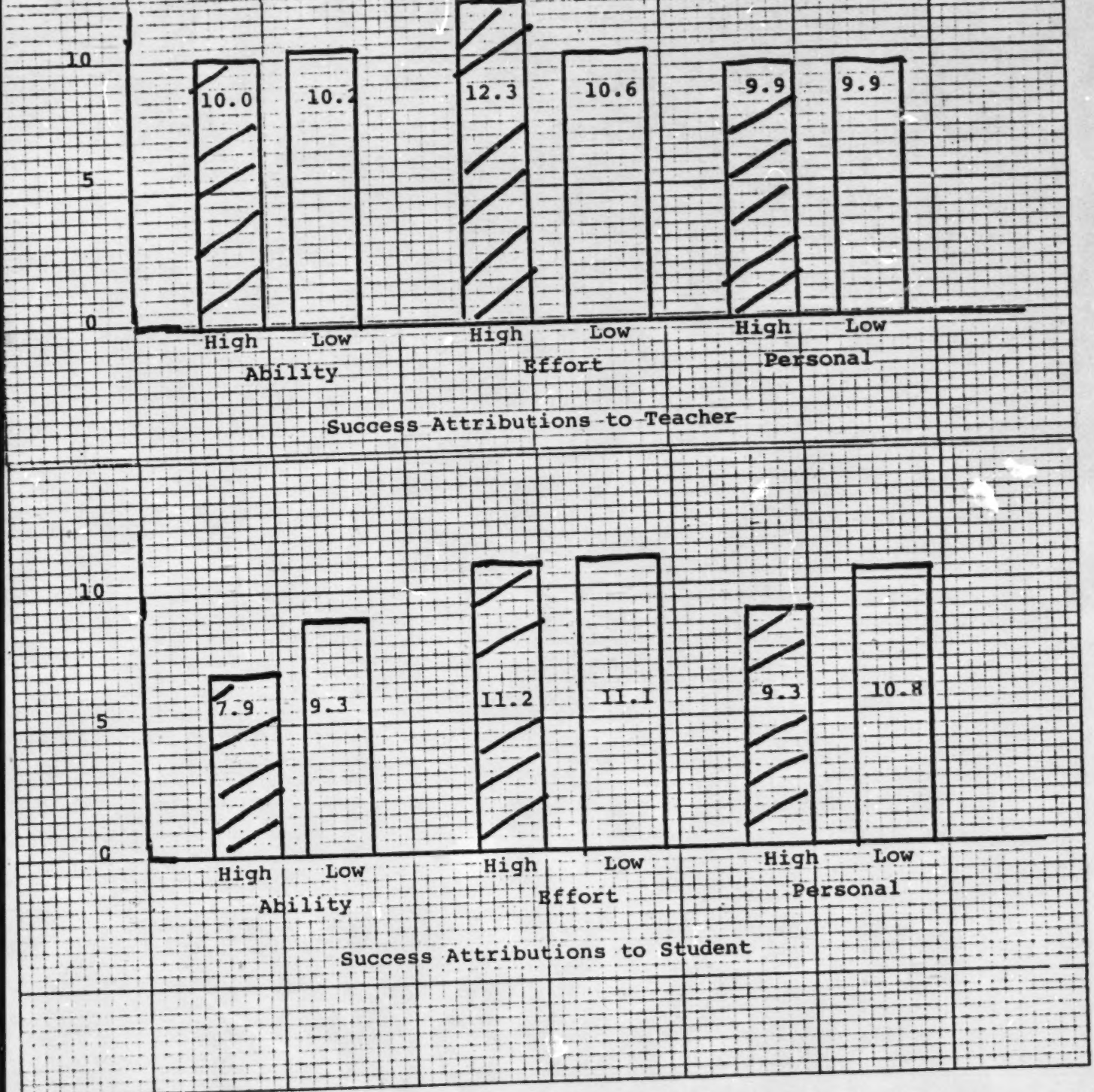
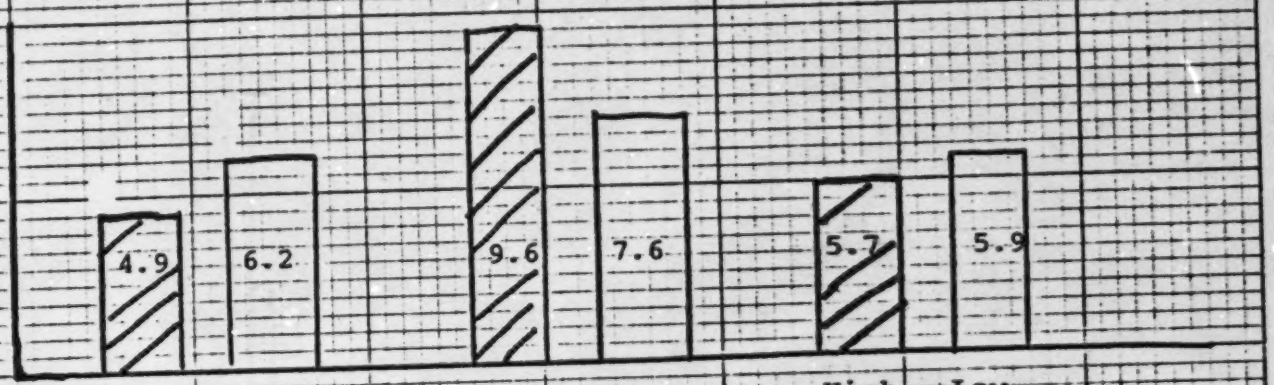
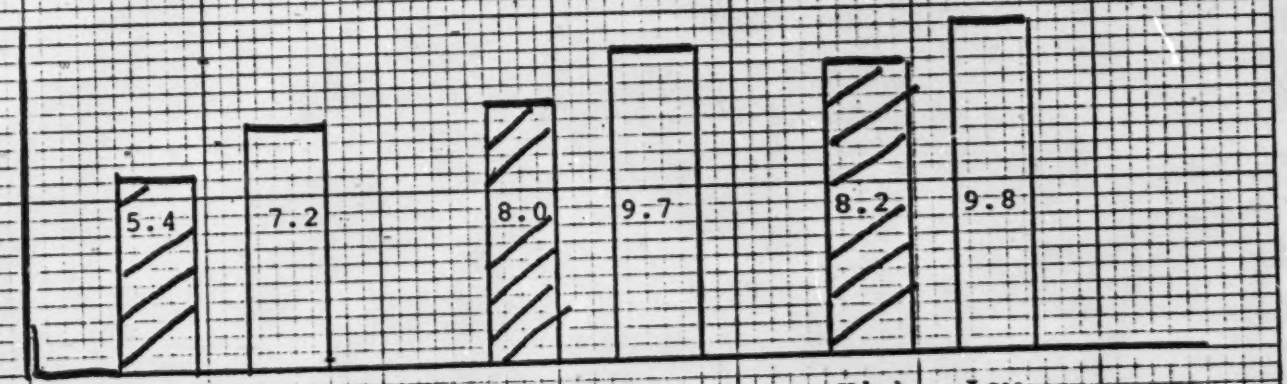


FIGURE 5

ATTRIBUTIONS OF TEACHERS WITH HIGH AND LOW SUCCESS ORIENTATION FOR STUDENTS' FAILURE





Personal Preferences

Directions. Imagine how you will react to the following situations as a teacher in your own classroom. Indicate how you think you will feel about each situation after your student teaching is finished. For each item, circle a number to indicate a strong preference, or to record an intermediate position. Use the code at the right.

1 = You strongly	prefer A.
2 = You moderately	prefer A.
3 = You slightly	prefer A.
4 = A/B are equally	desirable.
5 = You slightly	prefer B.
6 = You moderately	prefer B.
7 = You strongly	prefer B.

(-) 9. If, while demonstrating my teaching when I am applying for a teaching job, the lesson goes OK, my strongest feelings will be

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(A) satisfaction in having done well.

(B) relief in having met the test.

(+) 16. Many people are demanding that teachers produce improved student scores on standardized tests. In attempting to meet these demands in my class, I will probably

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(A) enjoy teaching less than before.

(B) enjoy teaching more than before.

(+) 24. If I were asked to teach a class of students with learning disabilities, I would choose a class in which

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(A) the students would make slow but steady progress if I follow the teacher's manual.

(B) the students' progress depends entirely on my coming up with the right teaching strategy.

(-) 25. When I walk into my classroom to begin the day's first lesson, I will usually

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(A) think most about how to make things go exceptionally well.

(B) think most about how to keep things from going badly.

(+) 26. When a tough and important teaching assignment that I have been given goes OK but is not outstanding, I will probably feel

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(A) relief in having at least met the test.

(B) pleased that I did well.

(+) 30. If official visitors drop in to observe my class, I will think most about

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(A) how they might criticize my teaching performance.

(B) how pleased they will be by my performance.

Figure 6. The success-orientation scale for teachers

Analysis of Student Success

Directions. This year you have had many opportunities to teach groups of students. One some of these occasions, students learned a lot. Consider some typical occasions in which students learned a lot. Why did they learn so much on these occasions? Please read the possible reasons below. Indicate the importance of each reason by circling a number, using this code.

5 = An extremely important reason.
4 = A very important reason.
3 = A fairly important reason.
2 = A somewhat important reason.
1 = A slightly important reason.
0 = Of no importance at all.

Reasons for Student Success	Importance of this reason for student success in learning					
33. The students were generally very capable learners.	5	4	3	2	1	0
34. I spent a lot of time preparing for this lesson.	5	4	3	2	1	0
35. The students were very cooperative that day.	5	4	3	2	1	0
36. I have a lot of ability for teaching this subject.	5	4	3	2	1	0
37. I tried very hard to do a good job of teaching.	5	4	3	2	1	0
38. I really enjoy teaching this subject.	5	4	3	2	1	0
39. The students worked very hard to learn.	5	4	3	2	1	0
40. They were very interested in this subject.	5	4	3	2	1	0
41. I have a real talent for teaching this topic.	5	4	3	2	1	0
42. I'm good at getting students involved in this topic.	5	4	3	2	1	0
43. I paid careful attention to each pupil's performance.	5	4	3	2	1	0
44. I just let myself go in a spontaneous, genuine way.	5	4	3	2	1	0
45. The students really tried to do their best.	5	4	3	2	1	0
46. The students knew how to learn this subject well.	5	4	3	2	1	0
47. The students seemed to be in the right mood to learn.	5	4	3	2	1	0
48. The students and I just happened to hit it off well.	5	4	3	2	1	0
49. I really like the subject I was teaching that day.	5	4	3	2	1	0
50. Things just seemed to go very well that day.	5	4	3	2	1	0
51. The students had a lot of aptitude for this subject.	5	4	3	2	1	0
52. The students paid very careful attention that day.	5	4	3	2	1	0
53. Fortunately, there were no distractions or interruptions during the session.	5	4	3	2	1	0

Figure 7. Attribution test for student success

Part 4. Analysis of Student Failure

Directions. You may have found that on many occasions students have not learned very much at all. Consider some typical situations in which students did not learn very much. Why did they not learn well on these occasions. Please use the same scale to indicate below how important each reason was for students' failure to learn.

5 = An extremely important reason.
4 = A very important reason.
3 = A fairly important reason.
2 = A somewhat important reason.
1 = A slightly important reason.
0 = Of no importance at all.

Reasons for Student Failure	Importance of this reason for student failure to learn.					
54. The students were generally fairly slow learners.	5	4	3	2	1	0
55. I did not prepare well enough for the session.	5	4	3	2	1	0
56. The students were fairly uncooperative learners.	5	4	3	2	1	0
57. I really don't have much ability to teach the topic.	5	4	3	2	1	0
58. I didn't try very hard to do a good job of teaching.	5	4	3	2	1	0
59. I don't really like teaching this subject.	5	4	3	2	1	0
60. The students didn't work very hard to learn.	5	4	3	2	1	0
61. They were disinterested in this subject.	5	4	3	2	1	0
62. I don't have much ability to teach this subject.	5	4	3	2	1	0
63. I'm not good in getting students involved in this subject.	5	4	3	2	1	0
64. I didn't pay careful attention to each student.	5	4	3	2	1	0
65. I tried to be relaxed and informal; it didn't work.	5	4	3	2	1	0
66. The students didn't try to learn that day.	5	4	3	2	1	0
67. The students didn't know how to learn this subject.	5	4	3	2	1	0
68. The students were in a poor mood to learn that day.	5	4	3	2	1	0
69. The students and I just didn't seem to hit it off well that day, for some reason.	5	4	3	2	1	0
70. I don't especially like the topics I was teaching.	5	4	3	2	1	0
71. Things just didn't go very well at the time.	5	4	3	2	1	0
72. They didn't have much aptitude for learning the topic.	5	4	3	2	1	0
73. The students didn't pay attention that day.	5	4	3	2	1	0
74. Unfortunately, there were lots of distractions.	5	4	3	2	1	0

Figure 8. Attribution test for student failure